DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 254 SO 027 191

AUTHOR Duerr, Karlheinz
TITLE The Implications of the Individualism and Communitarian Debate for Civic Education: The Task of Democratic Orientation.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Individualism and Community in a Democratic Society (Washington, DC, October 6-11, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizenship; *Citizenship Education; *Civics; *Democracy; *Democratic Values; Foreign Countries; Futures (of Society); *Individualism; Political Attitudes; Social Change; *Values Education
IDENTIFIERS Communitarianism; *Europe (East); Germany

ABSTRACT

Although the demise of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 was described as "the ultimate victory of Democracy," this paper asserts that serious internal problems exist within modern democracies throughout Europe and the United States today. However, civic education offers a potential remedy. Part 1, "The New Democratic Question," identifies the main problem area as the relationship between the individual and the community, the so-called "communitarian debate." With the decline of many formerly dominant social institutions (religions organizations, the family, and school) that defined and provided answers to basic moral and ethical questions, the new replacements are often factions and small organizations that offer an almost infinite variety of moral norms, resulting in a new sense of uncertainty, a lack of social and cultural orientation, and a rise in individualism. In Part 2 "The Crisis of Democratic Orientation" is evidenced in the following three societal developments: the decline of central political institutions; the growth in distance between citizen and state; and the rise of special agenda organizations (social movements, interest and lobby groups). These developments represent a change in democratic attitudes resulting in a growing divide between the way democracy works in practice and its normative and legal foundations as set in its constitutions and laws. Part 3, "Implications for Civic Education," proposes that civic education is the best arena in which to ensure that democratic principles are embedded firmly in the social framework of a society and in the hearts and minds of the people. However, a new civic education framework should include expanded methods that reflect social change and the multiplicity of the factors at work in the public sphere. (CB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 402 254

International Conference

Individualism and Community

in a Democratic Society

Washington, D.C.

October 6-11, 1996

The Implications of the Individualism and Communitarian Debate for Civic Education: The Task of Democratic Orientation

Dr. Karlheinz Dürr

German Institute for Research in Distance Education

at the University of Tübingen, Germany

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Karlheinz Dürr

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

S0027191

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

There appear to be three reasons for looking closer at the impact of the communitarian debate on Civic Education:

- ***First,*** there is ***The New Democratic Question:*** Democracy has reached a turning-point which is at the heart of the communitarian debate about the relationship between the individual and the community.

- ***Second,*** out of the new conditions democracy is faced with there arises ***The Crisis of Democratic Orientation:*** The debate about the crisis of democracy is in full swing, but I would prefer to see this not as a crisis of the democratic system of governance, but as a crisis of orientation. Communitarian ideas are at the center of that debate, and even though not all of their idealistic or religious premisis may be acceptable, they certainly offer insights that could help to shape the basis of a new consensus in any democratic society.

- ***Third,*** if we are faced with a crisis of democratic orientation, it seems obvious to me that there follows a ***New Task for Democratic Education:*** If we discuss the fundamentals of democracy and civil society in the 21st Century, then certainly we have to reflect on the means by which such a new understanding can be transferred into the community, and this inevitably leads us to a discussion about the essentials of future educational processes.

1. The New Democratic question

Whenever we claim that Democracy arrived at a turning-point, that democratic systems today seem more endangered than ever before, such assertions actually seem paradoxical. In 1989, democracy as a political system had its greatest success: After the demise of Communism, there was much talk of "the ultimate victory of Democracy". For a while we could presume that a new, glamorous era of democratic development and progress was ahead, free of all major ideological quarrels, and some even foresaw an "End of History", if only for the simple reason that there was no alternative to democracy.[1]

Today, however, it becomes more and more apparent that Democracy did not *defeat* Communism but merely *survived* it. The early optimistic expectations about a New World Order free of conflicts did not materialise. Instead, after the removal of the East-West-confrontation as the prime conflict, the other major conflicts came to the fore, such as underdevelopment, migration, global ecological problems, to name but a few.

But besides these exterior problems, I believe we also obtained a much clearer view of the *actual state of democracy*. Once the ideological fight with communism was removed, the internal malaises of democracy became ever more pronounced and visible.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

But it is not only the visible image of democracy as shown by its institutions and procedures that gave rise to new doubts. Sociologist Peter L. Berger points out that, in comparison with earlier periods, there is today a growing *uncertainty about basic cognitive and normative guidelines*. Berger says, "Modernity has brought about a deepening and expanding process of relativization... [affecting] more and more areas of ... a firmly established worldview... It remains the case that large numbers of people in modern or modernizing societies feel disoriented. They are unsure as to how the world is to be understood, as to what is right or wrong morally, and as to how they should live."[2]

Such doubts and questions, however, have always been at the heart of philosophical and ethical discussions. So why should we consider them a problem for today's societies?

I believe that in today's societies we witness the decline of many formerly dominant social institutions that defined and provided answers to basic moral and ethical questions - religious organisations, the family, the school, and so on. In Germany, for example, the social and political influence of the two major churches - the Catholic and the Protestant Churches - has declined considerably, whereas the so-called "special agenda organisations" - like ecological movements, peace groups, women groups and so on - have gained weight in the general public debate. In sum, in earlier times there were just a few explanations of what is right or wrong, and which were offered by a few very large institutions; today, however, there is a growing number of such cultural orientations offered by a large number of factions and small organisations. And many of these factions and small organisations claim to tell the one and only truth. Cultural philosopher James L. Hunter says that today we can find nearly infinite variations in definitions of moral authority.[3] So we can state that the cultural homogeneity within many if not all nations is declining, giving rise to a new *sense of uncertainty* and a *lack of social and cultural orientation.*

2. The Crisis of Democratic Orientation

In the context of these uncertainties, Democracy itself becomes the source of worry. Some - like political scientist Samuel Huntington - had for a long time warned that a "crisis of democracy" was near, caused by the disintegration of civil order, the breakdown of social discipline, the debility of leaders and the alienation of citizens.[4]

Indeed, it seems that Democracy is endangered by many and complex phenomena within the domestic societies. The Debate on Individualism and Communitarianism points to those dangers:

- *the increasing dominance of individualism*
- *the growing distance between the citizen and the democratic system*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

- *the dissolution of community links*
- *the lack of participative energies*
- *the crisis of democratic political institutions, especially of political parties*
- *the rise of populism*
- *the refusal to feel responsible for the common weal*
- *the dominance of economic principles in everyday decisions*
- *the equivalent treatment of democracy and economic success*
- *the increasing disinterest and apathy in political matters*
- *the growing influence of radical and extremist movements.*

On the other hand, and in spite of these developments, there is no empirical evidence as yet that points to a "crisis of democracy" *as a political system*, that is, with regard to democratic principles like constitutionalism and balance of power. The general support for this kind of governance among the populations in the established democracies is high in all member countries of the European Union. Rather, the problem seems to be that people get more and more *cynical* about government and state. They feel that government is aloof, that their problems are not recognised by those in power. The confidence in the performance of government and the political class is declining rapidly. And, as shown by an increasingly fierce debate on the issue of a "just taxation system" in Germany, there is an underlying trend to disregard norms and values defined, imposed and enforced by the state. If some rule or by-law does not confirm to one's own objectives, if it conflicts with one's own interest of self-fulfilment, then with increasing frequency such rules or by-laws are disobeyed, as shown by the growing inclination to avoid taxes, to disobey the speed limit, to cheat with insurance claims or to commit a variety of trivial offences.

All these aspects I mentioned so far may be a negative consequence of increasing individualisation. However, I'd like to emphasise that individualisation has not only the negative connotation as described above, but also a positive one, if it is directed at pushing back a bureaucratic state that keeps interfering in the lives of its citizens. But in general, a democratic state needs to a certain degree social trust and political obedience.

To sum up, individualisation *per se* does not necessarily lead to a crisis of democracy as a system *but may lead to a crisis of democratic orientation* within the society.

A major survey of political attitudes of young German carried in 1984 showed that only 28 percent were "very much interested" or at least "interested" in politics, and 75 percent could not imagine ever to stand as candidate for a function in politics. By contrast, 90 percent declared that Democracy was of great value to them.[5]

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The extent to which this *crisis of democratic orientation* may happen becomes clearer when one looks at some basic developments in our societies.

- **First**, there are aspects like *trust in government, membership in political parties and democratic participation*. Trust in government in the USA has from the very high level of 75 percent in 1964 shrunk to a mere 20 percent in 1994. In Western Europe, the satisfaction with the way democracy works moved up dramatically after the revolutions in Eastern Europe, but fell thereafter to an all-time low. A similar development of voter alienation occurred in Japan and can also be shown for many other democracies. Political parties have fallen into disrepute for many reasons, such as corruption like in Japan and Italy, and membership in the established political parties is declining in all Western societies. At the same time, the voting behaviour is changing and in most countries the turn-out at national elections is deplorably low.

- **Second**, another major aspect that points to a crisis of democratic orientation is the *growing distance between the citizen and the state*. This argument, however, has two sides. I have no doubt that the distance between state and citizen should indeed be increased. There are much too many instances of government interference in the lives of the citizens, and also much too many examples of citizens becoming dependent on the state and unable to develop their own initiative. So, without doubt, there are valid arguments to reduce the role of government in our daily lives. The negative meaning, however, is based on the presumption that the state is unresponsive, rigid, that governments use their power irresponsibly, and that the state, in general, deals with the needs and articulations of its citizens only by bureaucratic procedure, political propaganda or downright neglect. It is this feeling that poses a real threat to our democratic attitudes, because it can lead many or even most people to opt out, to cease to participate or even cease to vote. For example, in the survey among young Germans mentioned before, 67 percent claimed to vote regularly, but 69 percent could not imagine ever to become member of a political party.[6]

- **Third**, there is an astonishing *rise of the so-called "special agenda organisations"*, that is various social movements, interest groups and lobby groups. These have influenced the political process and public discourse for a long time, but today they seem on the point of dominating it. The national debate about abortion in the US, for instance, is dominated not by the political parties but by the "special agenda organisations" in both camps.[7] With growing memberships, huge "war chests" full of Dollars and increasing attention paid to them by the mass media, these organisations are on the point of becoming a new kind of political party, but with only one set of objectives. One could even term them "single issue parties".

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The three developments I mentioned - the decline of central political institutions, the distance between citizen and state, and the rise of special agenda organisations - all point to the need for a reform of our own perception of democracy. They also point to a growing divide between the way democracy works in practice and its normative and legal foundations as set in our constitutions and laws. We must work to narrow the gap again, because otherwise it will eventually develop into a major cleavage that will afflict the system as a whole.

The Debate on Individualism and Communitarianism highlights many of the basic shortcomings in great detail which I listed above. German Political Scientist Werner Weidenfeld says: "Every political system is continually questioned with view to its legitimacy and efficiency. This is especially true for democracies. (... and it implies that) democracies are endangered, particularly if they fail to supply their own justification... (...) Under the surface ... a cultural transition is taking place with far-reaching consequences."[8]

Democracy depends on the truly democratic attitudes of the citizens, and the developments mentioned before deeply affect those attitudes. Because all these trends take place simultaneously, and because no society is immune against them, their positive and negative impacts can be felt in virtually every society.

I believe that this involves a triple challenge:

- A challenge for *politicians, parties, and all organisations engaged in the public discourse* to make political decisions more transparent;
- a challenge for *educators* to develop new methods of teaching and learning with the aim to prevent the further alienation of citizens from the state, and
- a challenge for citizens and in particular for parents and students to rediscover the meaning and benefits of social and political engagement.

3. Implications for Civic Education

There is no way to *impose* democracy. Democracy is a way of governance; yet it is also a way of life and an individual attitude. Basic values like human rights, freedom, and equality must be shared by many to form a common will and to achieve a democratic society. And the common will must be transformed into democratic institutions.

These aspects are self-evident to such a degree that they don't attract attention at all. And this is exactly the reason for the present-day malaise of democracy, because in most established democracies those values are now taken for granted, nothing to think about

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

and nothing to worry about. So, at least in the Western societies, it is this climate of indifference, of cynicism and neglect, and in general the decline of a democratic culture, that poses the greatest threat to truly democratic attitudes.

The task ahead is to ensure that democratic principles are firmly embedded in the social framework of a society and in the hearts and minds of the people. To achieve this, there may be different ways; but as far as I can see, Civic Education alone offers the possibility of a regular, organised, institutionalised process of teaching these democratic values.

What could be the implications of Communitarian thinking for a new consensus in Civic Education? From what I said before, some conclusions could be drawn regarding the future tasks of Civic education.

- *First, the decline of central agencies for the political socialization of young people creates a vacuum that is being filled by new agencies. Civic education must develop concepts for this new situation.*
- *Second, new social movements, intermediate institutions, special agenda organisations increasingly exert influence on the political sphere. These changing conditions must be reflected in Civic education.*
- *Third, the search for new methods in Civic education must include the promotion of "multi-perspectiveness" with regard to practically all aspects of public life..*
- *Fourth, we must eventually arrive at a new understanding of and develop a new framework for Civic education which reflect social change and the multiplicity of the factors at work in the public sphere.*

Let me comment on these tasks.

First, I said the ***decline of central agencies for political socialization creates a vacuum that is being filled by new agencies***. That vacuum concerns the formulation of moral and ethical norms for young people. It came into existance by the decline of the authority and status of central socialization agencies, such as the family, the church, the school. In earlier times, central moral attitudes and norms were formulated by such agencies; now, as I have tried to show earlier on, there is an over-abundance of institutions and agencies all offering their own interpretations of what is right or wrong.

I frankly admit that I don't see any institution or socialization agency able to fill the vacuum. We can't restore the importance of the family, of the school or of religious institutions. I believe that part of the vacuum is being filled by a new, individualistic lifestyle which promotes its own norms and values to young people. Another part of the vacuum is being filled by the media; and this is particularly true for the political sphere, to the extent that

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

people say that journalists and media people are "hidden civic educators" and that they have more influence on the shaping of political opinions and attitudes among young people than the civic educators in the schools. But by "media" I do not mean TV only but also the huge "infotainment" opportunities offered by computers, videos, the Internet and so on.

There may be better solutions, but generally I believe that the time of all-important, established, central socialization agencies is over. So in the future we shall have to make do with a new combination of factors influencing the political socialization of young people: a multitude of relatively small and sectarian socialization agents on the one side and the growing but shapeless and partly uninstitutionionalized communication and information sector on the other.

Second, as I have tried to show, huge numbers of ***new social movements, intermediate institutions, special agenda organisations increasingly exert influence on the political sphere***. They even shape the public debate about almost all aspects of social and political life. This applies to America, and it is increasingly true for European countries. The Communitarian debate points out such shifts within the political sphere. At least in Germany, however, such institutions, movements and organizations are not sufficiently represented in Civic education. Civic education still equals constitutionalism and parliamentarianism with the public sphere but ignores the fact that many, if not most, important developments take place outside the traditional core of the political process. So, in practice, Civic education may deal with the shaping and formulation of a common will, but the teaching is dominated by traditional aspects of pluralism and participation like voting, party politics and law-making.

Third, in Civic Education we have to place much more emphasis *on the* ***search for new methods***. We must develop strategies that enable students to see things from different viewpoints (an approach that could be called "multi-perspectiveness"). This task is a direct result of the growing multiplicity of cultural backgrounds and orientations in our societies and in our schools, and it is perhaps the most challenging task: By all means civic educators must avoid overwhelming their students with their own opinions or with their own cultural backgrounds.

Fourth, when considering these developments I mentioned before, I believe it is necessary to work on ***a new understanding of Civic education***. There certainly is a general tendency among young people to adopt a new lifestyle which contains distinctly hedonistic and even egoistic characteristics. Yet it also contains very lively and even creative attitudes. Indeed, with electronic instruments more and more able to perform human tasks, creativity and imaginativeness may one day become the only areas in which humans can excel. This would mean that the creative capabilities of individuals can be freed and need be freed at

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

the expense of overregulation in eduation. So a reform of educational processes in general and of Civic education in particular are the preconditions for any attempt to come to a new understanding about the future of democratic societies. After all, community life, participation rights, defending the rights of vulnerable groups within the society, all require the capability of critical, uninhibited and independent thinking, which, at the moment, is not exactly the main focus of our educational systems.

Civic Education, therefore, is faced with the task of providing orientation in a sea of social change and uncertainty. If there is an increasing tension between individualistic and community-oriented attitudes, the tension will also become visible in the education processes. If there is to be a "Society of egoists", as some point out,[9] then that society will be echoed in the classroom. As democratic politics and policies become more and more compilcated and even unpredictable, there is a widening gap between the ability of students to learn and comprehend complex political, social and economic developments, and the need to shape them into informed and responsible citizens. Therefore, new models, concepts and ideas are required to gain back the attention of the students for the political process and the life of the community, but also to push back developments in the public sphere that are harmful to basic democratic principles. And new concepts and ideas are required to help students to come to terms with an overabundance of information, of opinions and facts.

4. Conclusion

The Communitarian Debate does not meet with the same reception everywhere as in the US. The perception of an American "Culture War" (Hunter), for instance, is an important contribution to the Communitarian debate in America, but that conflict is basically a result of conflicting religious and non-religious attitudes.The reluctant reception of the Communitarian debate in Germany as in the rest of Europe is due to different academic and scientific cultures, but also to different political or rather public cultures in general. However, more important than such differences seems to be that many, though by no means all, of the Communitarian ideas are indeed acceptable to a broad field of political attitudes, from the moderate right to the moderate left of the political spectrum. So, generally speaking, much of the Communitarian diagnosis with regard to the present situation and future development of civil society and democracy is just as true in Europe as it is in America.

The debate about Individualism and Communitarianism points to some of the most evident dichotomies within democratic societies. I have tried to show that many of the results and consequences of the change in the way democracy works pose a threat to the basic

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

democratic orientation of the population. The Communitarian debate provides essential insights for civic educators into a better understanding of the way democracy works today and, therefore, helps them to prepare the next generation for an active and democratic citizenship.

---

[1] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History*, New York 1992; in German: *Das Ende der Geschichte. Wo stehen wir?* (translat. by Karlheinz Duerr et al.), München 1992. In his newer book "*Trust*" Fukuyama tries to correct some of the misunderstandings with regard to his thesis of an "End of History" (cf. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust. The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, New York 1995; in German: *Konfuzius und Marktwirtschaft. Der Konflikt der Kulturen*, translat. by Karlheinz Duerr et al., München 1996.

[2] Peter L. Berger, "Demokratie und geistig-kulturelle Orientierung", in Werner Weidenfeld (ed.), *Demokratie am Wendepunkt. Die demokratische Frage als Projekt des 21. Jahrhunderts* (translat. by Karlheinz Duerr u. Ursel Schaefer) Berlin 1996.

[3] Hunter, "The American Culture War", in Bertelsmann Foundation /Club of Rome (ed. by Peter L. Berger, *The Quest for Normative Order: Conflict and Mediation in Pluralist Society*; in German: *Wertekonflikte - Grenzen sozialen Zusammenhalts*, Gütersloh (to be published in February 1997, translat. by Karlheinz Duerr).

[4] Samuel Huntington et al, *The Crisis of Democracy*, New York 1975.

[5] Spiegel-Special, "Selbstporträt einer Generation - die Eigensinnigen", Hamburg 1994.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Hunter, 1997.

[8] Werner Weidenfeld, "Den Wandel möglich machen. Eine Diagnose zur politischen Kultur der Demokratie", in: Werner Weidenfeld (ed.), Demokratie am Wendepunkt., p. 15.

[9] Stefan Hradil, "Eine Gesellschaft der Egoisten? Gesellschaftliche Zukunftsprobleme, moderne Lebensweisen und soziales Mitwirken", in *Gegenwartskunde* 2/1996, p. 287-298.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE